

Gathering Through Song

A new album of a local couple seeks to make the music of the service an uplifting, inclusive experience.

Adam Stone *Staff Reporter*
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For almost a decade now, husband and wife Rabbi Moshe ben Asher and Magidah Khulda bat Sarah have looked for ways to improve the quality of the American synagogue experience. With the release of a new musical album this month, they are taking that effort into the home.

"It is a set of tools that work together to help deepen the religious spiritual experience," explained Rabbi ben Asher. "It isn't just music as performance. It's much more intended to be music in a *davening* mode, music as prayer."

The "Become A Blessing Kavanah Kit" includes an album of 36 new melodies for the Shabbat morning liturgy, along with a book of translations, meditations and interpretations.

As co-directors of the non-profit group Gather The People (www.gatherthepeople.org), the couple has worked primarily with rabbis and congregational leaders over the years, providing learning materials and other tools to help make the synagogue more rich and relevant.

"They have tried to bring the insights and practices of religiously based grass-roots organizing into the synagogue," said Rabbi Jonathan Slater, executive vice president of The Spirituality Institute, a virtual organization that offers programming in support of rabbis and other Jewish professionals. "They are looking to revive the congregation with the message that Jewish life and synagogues really are meant to address the issues that affect our lives."

Don't they do that already? The rabbi and his wife say no.

"We know a fair number of rabbis around the country, and we talk at length with them about their experiences," said Mrs. bat Sarah, who along with her husband attends Baltimore's Chevrei Tzedek congregation. "There have been a whole range of issues that



Rabbi Moshe ben Asher (right) and Magidah Khulda bat Sarah. (Photo David Sinclair)

people have talked to us about, from raising teens to having elderly parents in nursing homes, and typically the congregation is simply not relevant to those pressures." Those who have followed the couple's work say they have hit on a profound failing among Jewish institutions.

"One of the problems I see is that Jewish life is becoming unaffordable to the mainstream middle-class Jew," said Pini Herman, who met the couple while engaged in demographics research for the Los Angeles Jewish community.

Gather The People has made a range of materials available over the years. It offers complex organizational documents, such as the guide to "bi-annual strategic organizational inventorying and evaluation," as well as more hands-on materials, such as diagrams charting the flow of the Jewish holidays through the year, and even a blessing for love-making based on various scriptural sources.

The overriding goal, said Rabbi ben Asher, is to create an environment in which Jewish teaching assumes a more central place in Jewish life.

"When we think of Torah and Judaism, what is it that we hope for? In one sense we hope it becomes authoritative in people's lives. We hope that people who are exposed to it might want to change what they are doing and live their lives differently," he said. "We think the most likely way for that to happen is when it becomes *relevant* in people's lives."

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